Who Is Oakland: Anti-Oppression Activism, the Politics of Safety, and State Co-optation

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by CROATOAN, April 2012

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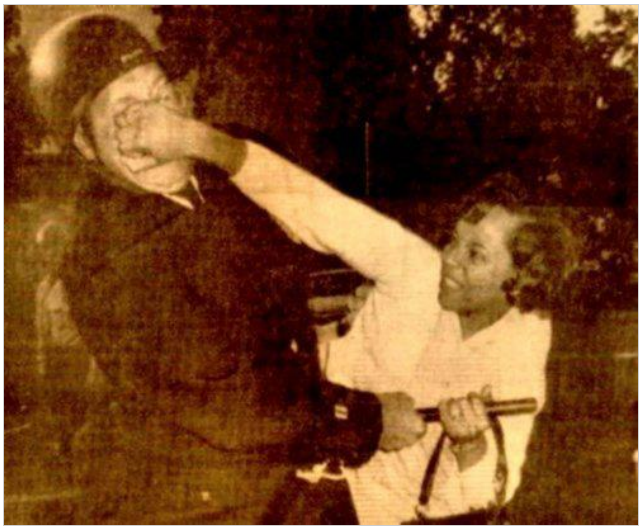

The other civil rights movement.

Synopsis

This pamphlet is offered in deep solidarity with anyone who is committed to ending oppression and exploitation materially. It is a critique of dominant forms of identity-based activism in the Bay Area and beyond, from privilege theory to contemporary interpretations of the legacy of decolonization and national

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liberation struggles. We argue that prevailing discourses of personal privilege and political representation in fact minimize and misrepresent the severity and structural character of the violence and material deprivation marginalized demographics face. White supremacy, according to this politics, is primarily a psychological attitude which individuals can simply choose to discard instead of a material infrastructure which reproduces race at key sites across society – from racially segmented labor markets to the militarization of the southern border.

Time and again in the Bay Area we have seen how any attempt to disrupt the functioning of these sites where race, gender, and sexuality are reproduced has often been deemed racist, sexist, ableist, or heteronormative because it places vulnerable marginalized communities in danger – communities which require the protection of the state, or the benevolence of the more powerful and privileged. Instead, what we call a politics of safety prefers rituals of cultural affirmation, reaffirms stereotypes of deserving victimhood, and stages spectacles of conversion where and varieties of individual privilege are acknowledged and disavowed. This pamphlet argues that this politics has proven time and again to be materially ineffective at best and at worst an apology for state and institutional power.

Demanding increased cultural sensitivity or recognition from the very institutions which govern us, and the individuals and groups who are politically committed to viewing us as fundamentally inhuman, has utterly failed to stop a rising tide of bigotry and violence in an age of deep austerity. The pamphlet argues that our power lies instead in more effective practical tactics to disrupt, delegitimize, and dismantle these systems of domination.

The same underlying political logic behind the demand for increased "representation" in state/government/economic hierarchies is invoked by these institutions in order to justify managing dissent through force or coercion. Violent gendered and racist attacks on people are both concealed and enabled by a liberal anti-sexist and antiracist discourse of political representation promoted by state, nonprofit, and philanthropic institutions. The limits of dominant forms of anti-oppression activism are nowhere more clearly on display than in the persistent misrepresentations of a space which brought many of us together: Occupy Oakland.

We hear endless nostalgic appeals to civil disobedience, deescalation, and police-enforced pacifism, often from 1960s-era activists who have been seamlessly absorbed into positions of power within municipal, state, federal, academic, and nonprofit institutions. Free speech is "allowed" or "facilitated" by the state and used to justify continued beatings, surveillance, and paramilitary raids of protests across the country. Our pamphlet argues that the history and legacy of struggles teaches us that, in stark contrast to the rhetoric used by many social justice nonprofits and activists in the Bay Area today, struggle cannot but put us in danger and increase our vulnerability to violent repression. The moment our struggle is even slightly effective, we are in danger. The choice is not between danger and safety, but between the uncertain dangers of revolt and the certainty of continued violence, deprivation, and death. There is no middle ground.

I. The Non-Negotiable Necessity of Autonomous Organizing

As people of color, women, queers, and poor people coming together to attack a complex matrix of oppression and exploitation, we believe in the absolute necessity of autonomous organizing. By "autonomous" we mean the formation of independent groups of people who face specific forms of exploitation and oppression – including but not limited to people of color, women, queers, trans* people, gender nonconforming people, QPOC. We also believe the political value of organizing in ways which try to cross racial, gender, and sexual divisions.

No single group can possibly speak to the variety of challenges facing all of us, which is why we hope for the diffuse emergence of widespread autonomous organizing. We believe that a future beyond capital's 500 year emergence through enclosures of common lands, and the enslavement, colonization, and genocide of non-European populations – and beyond the 7000 or more years of violent patriarchal structuring of society along hierarchized and increasingly binary gender lines – will require revolutions within revolutions. Capitalism's ecocidal destiny, and its relentless global production of poverty, misery, abuse, and disposable and enslavable populations, will force catastrophic social change within most of our lifetimes – whether we actively pursue it or not.

No demographic category of people could possibly share an identical set of political beliefs, cultural identities, or personal values. Accounts of racial, gender, and sexual oppression as "intersectional" continue to treat identity categories as coherent communities with shared values and ways of knowing the world. No individual or organization can speak for people of color, women, the world's

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colonized populations, workers, or any demographic category as a whole – although activists of color, female activists, queer activists, and labor activists from the Global North routinely and arrogantly claim this right. Such "representatives" and institutions speak on behalf of social categories which are not, in fact, communities of shared opinion. This representational politics functions to eradicate, deny, or displace any space for political disagreement between individuals subsumed under the same identity categories.

At the same time we completely reject a vulgar "class first" politics which argues that racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia are simply "secondary to" or "derivative of" economic exploitation. For instance, the prevalence of racism in the US is not a clever conspiracy hatched by a handful of ruling elites but from the start has been a durable racial contract between two unequal parties. The US is a white supremacist nation indelibly marked by the legal construction of the "white race" in the 1600s through the formation of a cross-class alliance between a wealthy planter class and poor white indentured servants. W.E.B. Du Bois called the legal privileges accorded to poor whites a "psychological wage": "It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent upon their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown to them."

We live in the shadow of this choice and this history. A history which is far from over.

II. Institutional Struggles Over the Meaning of Anti-Oppression Politics

a. On the Non-Profit Industrial Complex (NPIC), Again

Nonprofits exist to maintain society as we know it. Nonprofits often provide vital social services in the spaces left by the state's retreat from postwar welfare provisions, services which keep women, queers, and trans people, particularly those who are poor and of color, alive. The initial postwar welfare provisions themselves were provided primarily to white families – through redlining or the racially exclusive postwar GI Bill for example. Social justice nonprofits in particular exist to co-opt and quell anger, contain racial conflict, and validate a racist, patriarchal state. These organizations are often funded by business monopolies which have profited from and campaigned for the privatization of public social services like healthcare and education. This has been argued extensively by many who have experienced the limits of nonprofit work firsthand, most recently by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence.

Indeed, the exponential growth of NGOs and nonprofits could be understood as the 21st century public face of counterinsurgency, except this time speaking the language of civil, women's, and gay rights, charged with preempting political conflict, and spiritually committed to promoting one-sided "dialogue" with armed state bureaucracies. Over the last four decades, a massive nonprofit infrastructure has evolved in order to prevent, whether through force or persuasion, another outbreak of the urban riots and rebellions which spread through northern ghettos in the mid to late 1960s. Both liberal and conservative think tanks and service providers have arisen in response primarily to previous generations of radical Black, Native American, Asian American, and Chican@ Third World Liberation movements. In the 21st century, social justice activism has become a professional career path. Racial justice nonprofits, and an entire institutionally funded activist infrastructure, partner with the state to echo the rhetoric of past movements for liberation while implicitly or explicitly condemning their militant tactics.

The material infrastructure promoting these ideas is massive, enabling their extensive dissemination and adoption. Largely funded by philanthropic organizations like the Ford Foundation ($13.7 billion), Rockefeller Foundation ($3.1 billion), or the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation ($37.1 billion), the US nonprofit sector has grown exponentially, often through the direct privatization of the remnants of America's New Deal-era social safety net. One need only hear the names of these philanthropic organizations to realize that they are or were some of the largest business monopolies in the world, whose foundations are required to donate 5% of their endowment each year, while 95% of the remaining funds remain invested in financial markets. We are asked to thank these organizations for their generosity for solving problems which they are literally invested in maintaining. In 2009 nonprofits accounted for 9% of all wages and salaries paid in the United States, generated $1.41 trillion in total revenues, and reported $2.56 trillion in total assets. This funding structure ties liberal organizations charged with representing and serving communities of color to businesses interested primarily in tax exemptions and charity, and completely hostile to radical social transformation

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despite their rhetoric. In other words, if you promote this line of political activism and theoretical analysis, you have a good chance of being rewarded – financially. It is possible, now, to live off of these politics – but who is losing in this game?

"With increasing frequency," Filipino prison abolitionist and professor Dylan Rodriguez argues, "we are party (or participant) to a white liberal "multicultural"/"people of color" imagination which venerates and even fetishizes the iconography and rhetoric of contemporary Black and Third World liberation movements, and then proceeds to incorporate these images and vernaculars into the public presentation of foundation-funded liberal or progressive organizations. …[T]hese organizations, in order to protect their nonprofit status and marketability to liberal foundations, actively self-police against members' deviations from their essentially reformist agendas, while continuing to appropriate the language and imagery of historical revolutionaries. Having lived in the San Francisco Bay Area from 1995-2001, which is in many ways the national hub of the progressive "wing" of the NPIC, I would name some of the organizations …here, but the list would be too long. Suffice it to say that the nonprofit groups often exhibit(ed) a political practice that is, to appropriate and corrupt a phrase from…Ruth Wilson Gilmore, radical in form, but liberal in content."

b. Politicians and Police Who Are "Just Like Us"

In California some of the most racist policies and "reforms" in recent history have been advanced by politicians of color. We are not interested in increasing racial, gender, and sexual diversity within existing hierarchies of power – within government, police forces, or in the boardrooms of corporate America. We will not cooperate with municipal politicians, media spokespeople, and police – whatever their racial or gender identity – who initiated, executed, or supported military raids on Occupy/Decolonize encampments all across the country. When police departments and municipal governments can boast of their diversity and multicultural credentials, we know that there needs to be a radical alternative to this politics of "inclusion." Oakland is perhaps one of the most glaring examples of how people of color have not just participated in but in many instances led – as mayors, police chiefs, and city council members – the assault on poor and working class black and brown populations. Oakland Mayor Jean Quan speaks the language of social justice activism and civil rights but her political career in city government clearly depends upon satisfying right-wing downtown business interests, corrupt real estate speculators, and a bloated and notoriously brutal police force.

There is no more depressing cautionary tale of the fate of 1960s-era politics of "changing the state from within" than the career of Oakland Mayor Quan. Quan fought for the creation of an Ethnic Studies program at UC Berkeley in 1969, and in 2011 penned a letter to Occupy Oakland listing an array of state-approved social justice nonprofits in order to justify mass arrests and a police crackdown on protesters attempting to establish a community center and free clinic in a long abandoned city owned property.[1] In response to a season of strikes, anti-police brutality marches, and repeated port shutdowns in response to police assaults, the state offered two choices: either the nonprofits, or the police.

Mayor Quan surveys the aftermath of City Hall vandalism on January 28 Move-In Day.

Quan and other municipal politicians are part of a state apparatus that is rapidly increasing its reliance upon militarized policing to control an unruly population, especially poor people of color in urban areas. Policing is fast becoming the paradigm for government in general. A white supremacist decades-long "war on drugs" has culminated in a 21st century imperial "war on terror." The equipment

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and tactics of "urban pacification" are now being turned on American cities and on the citizens and non-citizens who are targeted by austerity measures which have for decades been applied to the Global South.

This is as much the case in the liberal Bay Area as it is anywhere else. Recently "Urban Shield 2011," a series of urban military training exercises for Bay Area police forces, was held on the campus of UC Berkeley in anticipation of raids on the Occupy Oakland encampment and other local occupied public parks. Israeli Border Police and military police from Bahrain, fresh from suppressing an Arab Spring uprising in their own country, took part in these exercises beside Alameda County Sheriffs and Oakland Police Department officers.

We see clearly that in an era of deepening budget cuts and America's global decline, the white liberal consensus about racial inclusion is quickly becoming economically unaffordable, and in its place we see increasingly widespread public support for mainstream, openly white supremacist social movements. Armed paramilitary white nationalist organizations like the Minutemen patrol the US border and murder with impunity, white supremacist media figures spout genocidal fantasies on the radio and television, and police killings of young black men and women have become so frequent that even the mainstream media has begun to report on it. At the same time, policing is fast becoming the paradigm for government in general. Liberal multiculturalism is not only ineffective in the face of these real material threats; it is the flip side of the same coin.

As Jared Sexton and Steve Martinot argue, "Under conventional definitions of the government, we seem to be restricted to calling upon it for protection from its own agents. But what are we doing when we demonstrate against police brutality, and find ourselves tacitly calling upon the government to help us do so? These notions of the state as the arbiter of justice and the police as the unaccountable arbiters of lethal violence are two sides of the same coin. Narrow understandings of mere racism are proving themselves impoverished because they cannot see this fundamental relationship. What is needed is the development of a radical critique of the structure of the coin.

[The police] prowl, categorising and profiling, often turning those profiles into murderous violence without (serious) fear of being called to account, all the while claiming impunity. What jars the imagination is not the fact of impunity itself, but the realisation that they are simply people working a job, a job they secured by making an application at the personnel office. In events such as the shooting of Amadou Diallo, the true excessiveness is not in the massiveness of the shooting, but in the fact that these cops were there on the street looking for this event in the first place, as a matter of routine business. This spectacular evil is encased in a more inarticulable evil of banality, namely, that the state assigns certain individuals to (well-paying) jobs as hunters of human beings, a furtive protocol for which this shooting is simply the effect."

c. Anticapitalism and the Material Reproduction of "Race" and "Gender"

Developing an understanding of race and gender oppression as necessary structural dynamics of capitalism; establishing community mutual aid and self-defense against the violence of emergent mainstream racist movements, against the systematic rape and exploitation of women, and against the systematic murder and/or economic ostracization of transgender, transsexual, and gender-nonconforming people; attacking ICE and police-enforced austerity policies which have historically targeted communities of color, naming and resisting the rollbacks of reproductive rights and access to healthcare as the patriarchal, racist attacks that they truly are; these are some of the major challenges facing all of us who understand that oppression is inextricable from global capitalist crisis. We cannot separate what's happening in Oakland from a global wave of anti-austerity and anti-police brutality general strikes, occupations, and riots across the globe – from Barcelona to Tottenham, from Tahrir to Mali, and from Bhopal to Johannesburg.

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March 29, 2012 general strike in Spain.

A recent communique critiquing the Occupy movement states: "Years of anti-police brutality work, indigenous land movement organizing, and fighting for transgender peoples' lives are but examples of movements that must not be abandoned in favor of focusing our collective energy on anti-capitalism."[2]

We reject the reductive zero-sum logic advanced by this analysis, which distills a set of dominant and largely unquestioned political assumptions which we see as not only to failing to mobilize mass numbers of the populations these activists claim to "represent" but also unable to materially impact the systems of domination which they criticize. We do not view the politics of anti-police brutality campaigns, indigenous land movement organizing, and transgender survival as either politically equivalent or consistent, no matter how "entangled," nor do we see these campaigns as only contingently related to the global economy.

"The participation of people of color does not change the fact that this occupation of public space upholds white supremacy," this communique goes on to argue. "Some of our own sisters and brothers have silenced our critiques in order to hold on to their positions of power as token people of color in the movement." The total lack of any material analysis of white supremacy here results in the claim that people of color can suddenly "uphold" white supremacy because they do not share the political analysis of the authors of this document. Meanwhile, the question of what makes a space white supremacist is left radically underspecified. Instead, people of color who do not agree with the politics advanced by this group are labeled white, informants, members of Cointelpro, or tokens. Often we are simply erased. This is a powerful and deeply manipulative rhetorical tactic, increasingly widespread in the Bay Area. Needless to say, as people of color, women, and queers, the authors of the above-quoted passage do not speak for us.

We will not be able to sustain ourselves and those we care for without creating non-state based support networks and without recognizing the mutual implication of white supremacy with capitalism and patriarchy. We confront a vicious, coordinated, and entirely mainstream ICE, police, and civilian assault against undocumented immigrants which is, to be absolutely clear, a nativist anti-Latin@ movement committed to patrolling the borders of a nation understood as fundamentally white. Intensifying anti-immigrant racism is not unrelated to capitalism, and just a national but an international phenomenon, fueled by the success of capitalist globalization, by the profits which could be realized through debt and structural adjustment programs, US agribusiness subsidies, "free trade" agreements like NAFTA and CAFTA, and through multinational industries inevitably searching for lower labor costs through the fragmentation of global supply chains. Austerity means women, and particularly poor black and brown women, are being forced by the state and their husbands, boyfriends, and fathers to make up for the cuts in services and wages through additional domestic and reproductive labor they have always performed.

As a recent W.A.T.C.H. communique from Baltimore puts it, "We know that economic crises mean more domestic labor, and more domestic labor means

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more work for women. Dreams of a 'mancession' fade quickly when one realizes male-dominated sectors are simply the first to feel a crisis – and the first to receive bailout funds. The politics of crisis adds to the insult of scapegoating the injury of unemployment and unwaged overwork. And the nightmare of fertility politics, the ugly justification of welfare and social security 'reforms.' 'Saving America's families,' the culture war rhetoric that clings to heteronormativity, to patriarchy, in the face of economic meltdown. Crisis translates politically to putting women in their place, while demanding queers and trans people pass or else. And the worse this crisis gets, the more the crisis is excused by a fiction of scarcity, the more the family will be used to promote white supremacy by assaulting women's autonomy under the guise of population control. The old Malthusian line: it's not a crisis, there's just not enough – for them."

Capitalism can neither be reduced to the "predatory practices of Wall Street banks" nor is it something which "intersects" with race, gender, and sexual oppression. Capitalism is a system based on a class, gendered, racialized, national, and international division of labor. Violence and deprivation, premature death and rape, are structural aspects of an economic system which decides who works and doesn't, who received care or doesn't, who eats or starves, and who survives or dies. To say that poor people of color, queers, or immigrants are not interested or not profoundly impacted by the economy, and instead interested only in reaffirming their identities within existing hierarchies of power, is to work for the liberation of a particular oppressed identity at the expense of another. In the US in particular, the celebration of cultural diversity, the recognition of cultural difference, the applauding of women and queers entering the workplace, and the relative decline of overtly racist or sexist beliefs among younger generations, has not improved but instead masked a dramatic deterioration of the material circumstances of racialized populations.

Massive accumulation through dispossession of native lands, which allowed the granting of 246 million acres of land to white homesteaders in the 19th century, required the enforcement capabilities of a white supremacist state and military. Constant, intimate, and intensive exploitation of women's unpaid labor, both in the home and as indentured domestic work, and always violently stratified according to race, formed the naturalized underbelly of capital's waged exploitation of workers. The cumulative economic impact of centuries of enslavement, genocide, colonialism, patriarchy, and racial segregation is not simply peripheral but integral to the functioning of the global capitalist economy.

The US economy reproduces racial, gender, and sexual inequality at every level of American society–in housing, healthcare, food sovereignty, education, policing, and prison. And also endlessly recreated in these very same sites are the categories "man/woman," "normal/abnormal," "able/disabled," "legitimate/illegitimate," "citizen/'illegal,'" and a series of stigmatized populations who always interfere with the smooth functioning of the national economy. The natural, "harmonious" relationship between citizens, patriots, taxpayers, owners, workers, rich, and poor, are disrupted by "illegals," welfare queens, homos, careless promiscuous teens, and so on. The category of "race" is materially recreated and endlessly renewed through these institutions which organize the lives of the undocumented, the imprisoned, the residents of aging ghettos which increasingly function as open-air prisons.

Speaking of capitalism as though it were somehow separable from racist exploitation, gendered violence, and the gamut of complex oppressions facing us in this world, confines antiracist and antipatriarchal struggle to the sphere of culture and individual privilege. The current dominant form of anti-oppression politics in fact minimizes the extent to which state-managed racial, gendered, and other inequalities are deepening across society despite a generalization of policies of linguistic, cultural, gender, and sexual inclusivity. Without attacking the material infrastructure which agglomerates power in the hands of some (a process whose end result is now called "privilege"), the equalization of "privilege" and the abolition of these identity-based oppressions in class society is a liberal fantasy.

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Mohawk warrior Brad "Freddy Krueger" Larocque, a University of Saskatchewan economics student, confronts a Canadian soldier during the Oka crisis, 1990.

d. The Racialization of Rape and the Erasure of Sexual Violence

Over the last year in California, the specter of a potential rape has been used to delegitimize spaces of militant action – in parks, streets, homes, or college campuses. It has also been used to excuse police violence, retroactively justifying the murders of countless black men like Kenneth Harding. The need to preempt potential rape has been explicitly used to justify the widely publicized pepper spraying of UC Davis students on November 18, 2011. We are tempted to say this incident is more about the need for state bureaucracies to justify their own existence than it does about epidemic of sexual violence in America, but the truth is that the reality of rape and sexual violence along with rape's deployment as an ideological weapon are immanent to the normal functioning of the economy and the state.

In recent interviews, UC Davis Chancellor Katehi and Vice Chancellor Meyer, respectively, defend the police response to the Occupy UC Davis encampment by invoking Occupy Oakland and the implicit threat of sexual violence from the "outside." Katehi claimed, "We were worried especially about having very young girls and other students with older people who come from the outside without any knowledge of their record … if anything happens to any student while we're in violation of policy, it's a very tough thing to overcome." Chancellor Meyer was much more specific about the hypothetical threats in question: "So my fear is a long-term occupation with a number of tents where we have an undergraduate student and a non-affiliate and there is an incident. And then I'm reporting to a parent that a non-affiliate has done this unthinkable act with your daughter, and how could we let that happen."[3]

Police crack down on the Occupy Davis encampment at UC Davis.

These statements illuminate how gender and race are typically linked in public discourse – here, Katehi, a woman in a position of power who much justify an illegal police action, infantilizes women as permanent victims and posits a tacitly racist specter of the criminal rapist, obviously black or brown, coming from the "outside" to the "inside" of the campus community. After the hypothetical rape, the rape survivor disappears. The rape is regrettable; this regret is not articulated in terms of the trauma of the rape survivor, but through the fact that the incident will have to be reported to a parent. To say rape is "unthinkable" is only possible from a position of privilege in which sexual violence is not an everyday reality.

Considering the fact that rape occurs within every class and every possible racial demographic, usually perpetrated by friends and family, it is utterly fantastic to suggest that a large university campus like UC Davis is a place where rapes do not occur and where rape culture doesn't flourish. Instead, rendering rape unthinkable is absolutely essential to its structural use as a tool of gendered subordination and exploitation. The pepper spray incident reveals how the specter of rape appears in

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state and media narratives when it's politically useful, and functions as a tool of racialization and criminalization (two processes which converge on poor black and brown populations) when in fact rape and sexual violence permeates every sector of society.

The locations which we are told to fear rape and sexual violence change depending upon what is politically expedient, and it's crucial to notice which sites are emphasized and when – rape has occurred in Occupy encampments across the country, but it has also occurred in households across the country, and yet media reports do not discourage us from heterosexual marriage and co-habitation. When is rape ignorable, and when is it unacceptable? Rape occurs frequently in dorm rooms, in fraternities and sororities, in cars, on dates, amongst persons of like age, ethnicity, and class. When the exclusion of police from public spaces is represented by the media as an invitation to rape, we are not at the same time informed that domestic abuse, sexual assault, and rape is in fact endemic to policing as an occupation.

While these administrators mobilize the specter of rape to defend the police response to the Occupy encampment at UC Davis, they take part in a nationwide campus culture that sanctions sexual violence. A major study on the topic found that colleges only expel persons found responsible for sexual assault in 10-25 % of all reported cases. These students were often suspended for a semester or received minor academic penalties. Half of the students interviewed by the Center said that student judicial services found their alleged assailants not responsible for sexual assault. One survey respondent summed up the sanctioning of sexual violence vis-à-vis student judicial reviews as "almost NEVER result[ing] in suspension, let alone expulsion. … Alleged perpetrators still remain on campus, in fraternities, and on sports teams."[4]

When sexual violence manifests in public organizing spaces, the subject is routinely labeled "divisive" or "just personal" and frequently likened to the state's use of the specter of rape to delegitimize radical action. A focus on sexual violence as a pressing issue has become associated with a politics of demobilization. Again, the result is that the reality of sexual violence, not merely in one month encampments, but in personal spaces, amongst persons from every racial and ethnic demographic who know and trust one another, is methodically erased. The silence around sexual violence sanctions it, just as it is the spectacular outrage at isolated incidents of racial violence (e.g. Trayvon Martin) sanctions the everyday police murder of black and brown individuals as routine. The reality of sexual violence is that it is silenced, evaded, ignored, empowering primarily cisgendered men at every level of society, and transforming conversations about sexual violence into further justification for intensified racist segregation, incarceration, and violence.

Young Chilean feminist: "Without god, without law, without husband: free, beautiful, and crazy"

III. The Limits of Contemporary Anti-Oppression Theory and Practice

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a. Identity is not Solidarity

Privilege theory and cultural essentialism have incapacitated antiracist, feminist, and queer organizing in this country by confusing identity categories with solidarity, minimizing and misrepresenting the severity of structural racial inequality, and reinforcing stereotypes about the homogeneity and helplessness of "communities of color." The category of "communities of color" is itself a recently invented identity category which obscures the central role that antiblack racism plays in maintaining an American racial order and conceals emerging forms of nonwhite interracial conflict. What living in a "post-racial era" really means is that race is increasingly "represented" in government, media, and education as "culture" while the nation as a whole has returned to levels of racial inequality, residential and educational segregation, and violence unseen since the last "post-racial" moment in American history – the mid-60s legal repeal of the apartheid system of Jim Crow.

Understanding racism as primarily a matter of individual racial privilege, and the symbolic affirmation of marginalized cultural identities as the solution to this basic lack of privilege, is the dominant and largely unquestioned form of anti-oppression politics in the US today. According to this politics, whiteness simply becomes one more "culture," and white supremacy one more ideology, instead of a structural position of dominance reinforced through institutions, civilian and police violence, access to resources, and the economy.

Demographic categories are not coherent, homogeneous "communities" or "cultures" which can be represented by individuals, no matter how well-intentioned. Identity categories do not indicate political unity or agreement. Identity is not solidarity. Gender, sexual, and economic domination within racial identity categories have typically been described through an additive concept, intersectionality, which continues to assume that political agreement is automatically generated through the proliferation of existing demographic categories.

For too long individual racial privilege has been taken to be the problem, and state, corporate, or nonprofit managed racial and ethnic "cultural diversity" within existing hierarchies of power imagined to be the solution. It is a well-worn activist formula to point out that "representatives" of different identity categories must be placed "front and center" in struggles against racism, sexism, and homophobia. But this is meaningless without also specifying the content of the politics of these "representatives." The US Army is simultaneously one of the most racially integrated and oppressive institutions in American society. "Diversity" alone is a meaningless political ideal which reifies culture, defines agency as inclusion within oppressive systems, and equates identity categories with political beliefs.

Time and again politicians of color have betrayed the very groups they claim to represent while being held up as proof that America is indeed a "colorblind" or "post-racial" society. Wealthy queers support initiatives which lock up and murder poor queers, trans* people, and sex workers. Women in positions of power continue to defend and sometimes initiate the vicious assault on abortion and reproductive rights, and then offload reproductive labor onto the shoulders of care workers who are predominantly women of color.

But more pertinent for our argument is the phenomenon of anti-oppression activists – who do advance a structural analysis of oppression – who consistently align themselves with a praxis that reduces the history of violent and radically unsafe antislavery, anticolonial, antipatriarchal, antihomophobic, and anticiscentric freedom struggles to struggles over individual privilege and state recognition of cultural difference. Even when these activists invoke a history of militant resistance and sacrifice, they consistently fall back upon strategies of petitioning the powerful to renounce their privilege or "allow" marginalized populations to lead resistance struggles.

For too long there has been no alternative to this politics of privilege and cultural recognition, and so rejecting this liberal political framework has become synonymous with a refusal to seriously address racism, sexism, and homophobia in general. Even and especially when people of color, women, and queers imagine and execute alternatives to this liberal politics of cultural inclusion, they are persistently attacked as white, male, and privileged by the cohort that maintains and perpetuates the dominant praxis.

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After marching more than 1000 miles, protesters with disabilities confront Bolivian riot police in La Paz, February 2012

b. Protecting Vulnerable Communities of Color and "Our" Women and Children: The Endangered Species Theory of Minority Populations and Patriarchal White Conservationism

The dominant praxis of contemporary anti-oppression politics operates primarily at the level of managing appearances, relinquishing power to political representatives, and reinforcing stereotypes of individually "deserving" and "undeserving" victims of racism, sexism, or homophobia. A vast nonprofit industrial complex, and a class of professional "community spokespeople," has arisen over the last several decades to define the parameters of acceptable political action and debate. This fundamentally liberal politics of cultural recognition, or what we have been calling state recognition of difference, must continually project an image of powerlessness and keep communities of color, women, and queers "safe" and confined to speeches and mass rallies rather than active disruption. For this politics of cultural affirmation, suffering is legitimate and recognizable only when it conforms to white middle-class codes of behavior, with each gender in its proper place, and only if it speaks a language of productivity, patriotism, and self-policing victimhood.

And yet the vast majority of us are not "safe" simply going through our daily lives in Oakland, or elsewhere. When activists claim that poor black and brown communities must not defend themselves against racist attacks or confront the state, including using illegal or "violent" means, they typically advocate instead the performance of an image of legitimate victimhood for white middle class consumption. The activities of women, queer people, and trans or gender-nonconforming people are barely recognized unless they remain within the confines of a politics of middle class respectability. Contemporary anti-oppression politics constantly reproduces stereotypes about the passivity and powerlessness of these populations, when in fact it is often people from these groups – poor women of color defending their right to land and housing, trans* street workers fighting back against murder and violence, black, brown, and Asian American militant struggles against white supremacist attacks – who have waged the most powerful and successfully militant confrontations and uprisings in American history. We refuse a politics which infantilizes us and people who look like us, and which continually paints nonwhite and/or non-male demographics as helpless, vulnerable, and incapable of fighting for our own liberation.

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People of color, women, and queers are constantly spoken of as if we were children in contemporary privilege discourse. Even children can have a more savvy and sophisticated analysis than privilege theorists often assume! "Communities of color" have become in contemporary liberal anti-oppression discourse akin to endangered species in need of management by sympathetic whites or "community representatives" assigned to contain political conflict at all costs.

When activists argue that power "belongs in the hands of the most oppressed," it is clear that their primary audience for these appeals can only be liberal white activists, and that they understand power as something which is granted or bestowed by the powerful. Appeals to white benevolence to let people of color "lead political struggles" assumes that white activists can somehow relinquish their privilege and legitimacy to oppressed communities and that these communities cannot act and take power for themselves.

And of course it is extremely advantageous to the powers that be for the oppressed to be infantilized and deterred from potentially "unsafe" self-defense, resistance, or attack. The absence of active mass resistance to racist policies and institutions in Oakland and in the US over the last forty years has meant that life conditions have worsened for nearly everyone. The prisons, police, state, economy, and borders perpetually reproduce racial inequality by categorizing, profiling, and enforcing demographic identities and assigning them to positions in a hierarchy of domination where marginalized groups can only gain power through the exploitation and oppression of others. The budget cuts and healthcare rollbacks are leaving poor queer and trans people without access to necessary medical resources like Aids medication or hormones, and other austerity measures have dovetailed with increasingly misogynist anti-reproductive-rights legislature which will surely result in an increasing and invisible number of deaths among women. As racial, ethnic, and gender diversity has increased in city and state governments, and in some sectors of the corporate world, racial inequality and poverty and structural gendered violence have rendered this form of representational "equality" almost entirely symbolic.

We have been told that because the "Occupy" movement protests something called "economic inequality" it is not a movement about or for us, despite the fact that subprime targeting of Blacks and Latinos within the housing market has led to losses between $164 billion and $213 billion, one of the greatest transfers of wealth out of these populations in recent history. And despite the fact that job losses are affecting women of color more than any other group.

We are told that because the "economy" has always targeted poor people of color, that increasing resistance from a multiracial cohort of young people and students, and from downwardly mobile members of the white working and middle class, has nothing to do with people of color – but that somehow reclaiming and recreating an idealized cultural heritage does. We reject race and gender blind economic struggles and analysis, but we do not reject struggles against what is, under capitalism, naturalized as the "economy." While the majority of Occupy general assemblies have adopted a neo-populist rhetoric of economic improvement or reform, we see the abolition of the system of capital as not peripheral but integral to any material project of ending oppression.

Recent statistics give a snapshot of worsening racial inequality in the US today: the median wealth of white households is 20 times that of black households and 18 times that of Hispanic households, the greatest wealth disparities in 25 years. Over 1 in 4 Native Americans and Native Alaskans live in poverty, with a nearly 40% poverty rate for reservations. From 2005 to 2009, Latin@s' household median wealth fell by 66%, black household wealth by 53%, but only 16% among white households. The average black household in 2009 possessed $5,677 in wealth; Latin@ households $6,325; and the average white household had $113,149.

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Oakland police preventing the reoccupation of a property in the process of foreclosure. 90% of Oakland's foreclosures are concentrated in 3 largely black and brown zip codes, 94621, 94603, 94605.

To address these deteriorating material conditions and imagine solutions in terms of privilege, or by advocating some 'return' to essentialist "traditional" cultural identities which are beyond political discussion, is to tacitly support the continual state and economic reproduction of racial and gender hierarchies, and renew racist and patriarchal violence in the 21st century.

c. On Nonprofit Certified "White Allies" and Privilege Theory

Communities of color are not a single, homogenous bloc with identical political opinions. There is no single unified antiracist, feminist, and queer political program which white liberals can somehow become "allies" of, despite the fact that some individuals or groups of color may claim that they are in possession of such a program. Such assumptions of "allyship" are deeply bound to a self-defeating politics of white benevolence and minority victimhood, rather than to the agency, heterogeneity, and self-organization of marginalized demographics.

This particular brand of white allyship both flattens political differences between whites and homogenizes the populations they claim to speak on behalf of. We believe that this politics remains fundamentally conservative, silencing, and coercive, especially for people of color who reject the analysis and field of action offered by privilege theory. In one particularly stark example of this problem from a December 4 2011 Occupy Oakland general assembly, "white allies" from a local social justice nonprofit called "The Catalyst Project" arrived with an array of other groups and individuals to Oscar Grant/Frank Ogawa Plaza, order to speak in favor of a proposal to rename Occupy Oakland to "Decolonize/Liberate Oakland." Addressing the audience as though it were homogeneously white, each white "ally" who addressed the general assembly explained that renouncing their own white privilege meant supporting the renaming proposal. And yet in the public responses to the proposal it became clear that a substantial number of people of color in the audience, including the founding members of one of Occupy Oakland's most active and effective autonomous groups, which is also majority people of color, the "Tactical Action Committee," deeply opposed the measure.

What was at stake was a political disagreement, one that was not clearly divided along racial lines. However, the failure of the renaming proposal was subsequently widely misrepresented as a conflict between "white Occupy" and the "Decolonize/Liberate Oakland" group. In our experience such misrepresentations are not accidental or isolated incidents but a repeated feature of a dominant strain of Bay Area anti-oppression politics which – instead of mobilizing people of color, women, and queers for independent action – must consistently purge political differences within identity categories and attack the demographic ratios of existing interracial political coalitions in order to survive.

White supremacy and racist institutions will not be eliminated through

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sympathetic white activists spending several thousand dollars for nonprofit diversity trainings which can assist them in recognizing their own racial privilege and certifying their decision to renounce this privilege. The absurdity of privilege politics recenters antiracist practice on whites and white behavior, and assumes that racism (and often by implicit or explicit association, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia) manifest primarily as individual privileges which can be "checked," given up, or absolved through individual resolutions. Privilege politics is ultimately completely dependent upon precisely that which it condemns: white benevolence.

IV. Occupy Oakland as Example

a. Occupy Oakland, "Outside Agitators," and "White Occupy"

When Mayor Quan and District Attorney Nancy O'Malley claim that Occupy Oakland is not part of the national Occupy movement, they're onto something. From the start, Occupy Oakland has charted a different course. Multiracial and militant, Occupy Oakland immediately rejected cooperation with city government officials, wildly flexible state and media definitions of "violence," and a now largely discredited white liberal argument that the police are part of "the 99%." After the coordinated raids on Occupy encampments across the country, the innumerable incidents of police violence, and slowly emerging details about the involvement of the Department of Homeland Security and its information "fusion" centers, the supporters of police collaboration have fallen silent.

The press releases of the city government, Oakland Police Department, and business associations like the Oakland Chamber of Commerce continue repeat that the Occupy Oakland encampment, feeding nearly a thousand mostly desperately poor people a day, was composed primarily of non-Oakland resident "white outsiders" intent on destroying the city. For anyone who spent any time whatsoever at the encampment, Occupy Oakland was clearly one of the most racially and ethnically diverse Occupy encampments in the country—composed of people of color from all walks of life, from local business owners to fired Oakland school teachers, from college students to the homeless and seriously mentally ill. Unfortunately, social justice activists, clergy, and community groups mimicked the city's erasure of people of color in their analysis of Occupy, when they were not negotiating with the mayor's office behind closed doors to dismantle the encampment "peacefully."

From the beginning the Occupy Oakland encampment existed in a tightening vise between two faces of the state: an array of nonprofit organizations negotiating with city bureaucracies to adopt nonviolence pledges and to move the encampment to Snow Park (itself later cleared by OPD despite total compliance of individuals who settled there) and a police department readying one of the largest and most expensive paramilitary operations in Bay Area history. It became increasingly clear that the city's reputation for progressive activism could not tolerate the massing of Oakland's homeless, and the extent of urban social damage, made visible in one location.

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Oakland city officials and local business people stage an Occupy Oakland counterdemonstration on the steps of City Hall.

The ongoing history of Occupy Oakland is a case study in how much antiracist politics has changed since Bobby Seale and Elaine Brown attempted to run for Oakland mayor and city council respectively in 1973 against a sea of white incumbents. Oakland's current city government—including the mayor's office, city council, and Oakland Police Department—is now staffed and led predominantly by people of color. Mayor Jean Quan speaks the language of social justice activism and civil rights but her political career in city government depends upon satisfying right-wing downtown business interests, corrupt real estate speculators, and a bloated and notoriously brutal police force. State-sanctioned representatives who claim to speak for Oakland's "people of color," "women," or "queers" are part of a system of patronage and power which ensures that anyone who gets a foot up does so on the backs of a hundred others.

Whatever the rhetoric of these politicians and state-sanctioned "representatives" of color, their job is to make sure the downtown property owners and homeowners in the hills are insulated from potential crime and rebellion from the flatlands due to increasingly severe budget cuts to social services, police impunity, and mass incarceration. Increasing numbers of Oaklanders rely upon a massive, unacknowledged informal/illegal economy of goods, services, and crime in order to survive. In other words their job is to contain this economy, largely through spending half (or over $200 million annually, and $58 million in lawsuit settlements over the past 10 years) of the city budget on the police department. When city politicians argue that protests are the work of "outsiders," they're also asserting the city government and the Oakland Police Department truly represent the city.

We do not believe that a politics rooted in privilege theory and calling for more racial diversity in fundamentally racist and patriarchal institutions like the Oakland Police Department, can challenge Oakland's existing hierarchies of power. This form of representational anti-oppression activism is no longer even remotely anticapitalist in its analysis and aims.

By borrowing a charge used against civil rights movement participants and 60s-era militants of color like Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, and even Martin Luther King Jr., as "outside agitators," city residents have been told that the interests of all "authentic Oaklanders" are the same. The one month Occupy Oakland encampment was blamed by the Oakland Chamber of Commerce and its city government partners for everything from deepening city poverty to the failure of business led development, from the rats which have always infested the city plaza to the mounting cost of police brutality. An encampment which fed about a thousand people every day of its month-long existence, and which witnessed a 19% decrease in area crime in the last week of October, was scapegoated for the very poverty, corruption, and police violence it came into existence to fight.

Real estate mogul and city power broker Phil Tagami patrolling
the Rotunda Building with a shotgun on the day of the November 2nd Oakland general strike.

If you believe the city press releases, "authentic Oaklanders" are truly represented by a police force which murders and imprisons its poor black and brown residents with impunity (about 7% of OPD officers actually live in the city) and a city government which funnels their taxes into business-friendly redevelopment deals like the $91 million dollar renovation of the Fox Theater—$58 million over budget—which line the pockets of well-connected real estate developers like Phil Tagami. The municipal government of Oakland is ruled by downtown business interests like the Oakland Chamber of Commerce and a culture of nepotism and bureaucratic incompetence. In a complete reversal of 60s-era militant antiracist political movements, we are told by these politicians, pundits, and many "social justice" activists that militant, disruptive, and confrontational political actions which target this city bureaucracy and its police forces can only be the work of white, middle

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class, and otherwise privileged youths.

b. The Erasure of People of Color From Occupy Oakland

Some of Occupy Oakland's "White Anarchist Outside Agitators"

People who are low income or working class, immigrants, gender non-conforming persons, women, and queers, who were not only active but central to Occupy Oakland and its various committees, are routinely erased from municipal and activist accounts of the encampment. In subsequent months the encampment has been denounced by social justice activists, many of whom worked directly with the mayor's office, who have criticized it as a space irreparably compromised by racial and gender privilege. Racism, patriarchy, homophobia, and transphobia were all clearly on display at Occupy Oakland – as they are in every sector of social life in Oakland. None of these accounts has even begun to address the fact that the perpetrators and victims of this violence did not belong to a single racial demographic, or track the evolving efforts of participants to respond to this violence.

People of color, women and trans* people of color, and white women and trans* people who participated heavily in Occupy Oakland have regularly become both white and (cis) male if they hold to a politics which favors confrontation over consciousness raising. And within white communities, similar political disagreements are routinely represented as differences between individuals with "white privilege" and those who are "white allies."

Currently, participants in Occupy Oakland, specifically the Occupy Patriarchy committee, have begun the work of assessing the interpersonal interactions in the general assemblies, and reflecting upon how the dynamics of the encampments quickly overwhelmed the capacity of participants to provide services and spaces free from sexual harassment and violence. To describe the participants of Occupy Oakland as primarily white men is not simply politically problematic and factually incorrect – it also prevents us from being able to look honestly at the social interactions that have actually occurred under its auspices.

V. Conclusion: Recuperating Decolonization and National Liberation Struggles; or, Revolution is Radically Unsafe

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Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian street vendor whose suicide helped spark the "Arab Spring."

Nearly fifty years after the dramatic upsurge of wars of national liberation fought over the terrain of what used to be called the "Third World," American antiracist politics provide few political tools for confronting emerging local and global racisms between nonwhite communities, and the persecution of ethnic minorities in former colonies by native, nonwhite elites. In the US, this has taken the form of increasing antiblack, Islamophobic, and anti-immigrant racism within "communities of color" and increasing class divisions within nonwhite demographic categories.

National elites in decolonizing countries have frequently appealed to idealized ethnic traditions and histories in order to cement social cohesion and hierarchies of domination within dictatorial one-party states. These appeals to a kind of authoritarian traditionalism often mobilize components of indigenous traditions which justify caste or caste-like social divisions. No longer requiring the force of occupying armies, formal decolonization in newly "independent" countries from Senegal to Vietnam has given way to a neocolonial austerity, structural adjustment, and debt imposed by the global north and administered by those who Frantz Fanon, in The Wretched of the Earth, famously called the "national bourgeoisie."

As Maia Ramnath observes about the actually-existing history of formal decolonization, "In seeking to replicate the techniques of colonial rule by institutionalizing states rather than abolishing them, the nationalist goal diverged from that of substantive decolonization. If the colonial regime's structures of oppression were not simply to be reopened for business under new local management, yielding a new generation of authoritarian dictatorships and cultural chauvinists, a different logic of anticolonial struggle was imperative.

…[T]he specter of stateness–the pressure to establish your own, or to resist the aggression of someone else's…calls forth the enforcement of internal conformity, elimination of elements who fail or refuse to conform, and relentless policing of boundaries, including those of hereditary membership, for which task the control of female bodies, sexuality, and reproduction is essential."

The view that communities of color in the US represent coherent internal colonies working for self-determination has been stretched to the breaking point by class divisions within these communities. We desire visionary liberation, from the institutions–the borders, the nation-form, the churches, the prisons, the police, and the military–which continue to materially reproduce racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies on a global scale. And yet we realize that cross-class demographic categories in the US are not "nations" or internal colonies and that the political content of contemporary decolonial struggles cannot be assumed in advance.

By understanding racism, sexism, and homophobia through the lens of individual privilege, this particular version of 21st century first world "decolonization" would be unrecognizable to the individuals who have fought for liberation under the banner of anticolonial struggle—a tradition which includes Toussaint L'Ouverture, Jean Jacques Dessalines, Lucy Parsons, Amilcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Robert F. Williams, Lorenzo Komboa Ervin, the Third World Women's Alliance, CONAIE, the indigenous militants of Bolivia in 1990, the militants of Oaxaca in 2006, the Mohawk people in the Municipality of Oka, Tupac Katari, Chris Hani, Nelson Mandela (who led the ANC's armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe), Emiliano Zapata, Juan "Cheno" Cortina, Jose Rizal, Bhagat Singh, Yuri Kochiyama, Kuwasi Balagoon, DRUM, Assata Shakur, and countless others.

Anticolonial struggles were violent, disruptive, and radically unsafe for the people who fought and died for self-determination. One cannot be a pacifist and believe in decolonization. One cannot be horrified at the burning of an American flag and support decolonization. One cannot guarantee the safety of anyone who is committed to the substantive decolonization of white supremacist institutions. The fact that decolonial struggle has been reduced to rituals of cultural affirmation, and appeals to white radicals to stop putting the "vulnerable" in harm's way, reveals the extent to which contemporary privilege politics has appropriated the radical movements of the past and remade them in its own image.

We are told that the victims of oppression must lead political struggles against material structures of domination by those who oppose every means by which the "victims" could actually overthrow these structures. We are told that an ambient resistance lies in "speaking truth to power" rather than attacking power materially. We are told by an array of highly trained "white allies" that the very things we need to do in order to free ourselves from domination cannot be done by us because we're simply too vulnerable to state repression. At mass rallies, we're replayed endless empty calls for revolution and militancy from a bygone era

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while in practice being forced to fetishize our spiritual powerlessness.

For us, a major lesson to be drawn from the brief existence of the Occupy Oakland encampment at Oscar Grant Plaza is that the state and a large network of Bay Area social justice activists and organizations will demonize militancy, defuse political confrontation, and channel public rage into one more state-sanctioned celebration of a "shared" cultural heritage.

It is no surprise then that the city of Oakland, and the state more generally, would prefer this sanitized form of "decolonization"—which does not practically interfere with budget cuts, foreclosures, teacher firings, disappearing schools, hunger, or the loss of healthcare. Austerity is racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia.

We are Oakland. And we are escalating.

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[1] http://www2.oaklandnet.com/oakca/groups/cityadministrator/documents/pressrelease/oak033073.pdf
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